

State reforms, adds dollars, for homeless prevention

By [Kathy McCabe](#) | GLOBE STAFF JULY 29, 2012

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With the state's 2,000 shelter beds full and 1,657 homeless families living in hotels or motels, Massachusetts has tightened eligibility for emergency housing assistance and increased funding to help low-income residents avoid homelessness.

Monthly income limits — ranging from \$1,070 per month for a single person to \$2,209 for a family of four, to \$4,487 for a family of 10 — won't be the only factor to determine if a person or family qualifies for shelter.

A person or family must also meet one of four criteria: victims of flood, fire, or natural disaster; victims of domestic violence; facing eviction through no fault of their own; or their housing poses a health and safety risk to children.

"We're trying to improve upon the system," said Aaron Gornstein, undersecretary of the state Department of Housing and Community Development, in a telephone interview. "We're beefing up our focus on homeless prevention so people don't have to go into shelter in the first place."

The state this year will spend more than \$100 million to prevent homelessness through programs ranging from rental vouchers, to help paying utilities and other household expenses, to help with finding employment, among other services. HomeBASE — an acronym for Building Alternatives to Shelter — was started last year to help homeless families find permanent housing, particularly those housed in hotels and motels across the state. The program received \$83 million for the fiscal year that started July 1, compared with \$65 million in the

last fiscal year. HomeBASE funds for the North Shore and Merrimack Valley this year total \$17 million, according to nonprofits in Lynn and Lowell administering the funds.

HomeBASE, which started Aug. 1, 2011, received so many applications that funding ran out on Oct. 29, and no new applications were accepted.

That contributed to a steady rise in the number of homeless families living in hotels and motels.

"We had an incredible rush at the door, because rental assistance was offered," said Ed Cameron, associate executive director at Community Teamwork Inc. of Lowell, which administers HomeBASE funds in the Merrimack Valley. "We'd have hundreds of families in those first days looking for assistance."

Funding for RAFT — an acronym for Residential Assistance for Families in Transition — increased dramatically, from \$276,000 in the last fiscal year, to \$8.6 million for this fiscal year, which started July 1.

The program provides up to \$4,000 to help a family at risk of becoming homeless stay in their housing, or to move to new housing instead of a shelter.

"That should help about 2,000 households around homelessness prevention," Gornstein said. "We'll be helping them to move to new housing, but avoiding homelessness."

The state budget includes \$16 million for emergency shelter in hotels. It's unclear if it is more or less than last year, because the budget then did not break it out as a line item. The state places homeless families in hotels or motels when its 2,000 shelter beds are occupied. On average it costs \$3,000 per month to house a family in a hotel, according to the state.

"We know that even providing some type of financial assistance, for a family to be in an apartment, is much less than spending \$3,000 per month on a hotel room," Gornstein added.

Case workers for regional agencies that distribute HomeBASE funds will work with people living in hotels to assess their needs, he said.

"We're going to make a very concerted effort to work with them to find housing," Gornstein said. "Hotels have no cooking facilities. It's not a place for people to live. It is far preferable for them to leave as quickly as possible."

Area nonprofits administering the HomeBASE program report steady interest from families seeking help.

"The families come to us in tremendous crisis, " said Laura MacNeil, deputy director of North Shore Community Action Program in Peabody, which runs HomeBASE on the North Shore. "They don't know where to go, they're worried about their children. We work with them to come up with a plan either to keep, or find, housing."

The community action program is one of five nonprofits in Gloucester, Peabody, and Lynn working with HomeBASE on the North Shore.

Together, the agencies placed 633 families in housing, according to Lynn Housing Authority and Neighborhood Development, which administers HomeBASE funding.

The region this year will receive \$7.2 million to place families, plus \$803,234 to hire additional staff, according to Lynn Housing.

In Lowell, Community Teamwork received \$9.9 million in HomeBASE funds, plus \$1.2 million to hire eight new case managers for outreach. At least 10 to 15 people per day visit the agency seeking housing assistance, according to Cameron.

"We know the number of homeless families that go into shelters and motels," said Cameron, who oversees housing and homeless services. Other families, who have only a little bit higher income, desperately seeking housing assistance."

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